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## Polyphony in *Absalom, Absalom!*

HOU Xiaoqian<sup>[a],\*</sup>; BAO Zhongming<sup>[a]</sup><sup>[a]</sup>Department of English at School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

*Absalom, Absalom!* is a dialogue about Sutpen's tragedy among four narrators. Three Great dialogues—the one between Rosa and Quentin, the one between Mr. Compson and Quentin, and the one between Quentin and Shreve—constitute the basic structure of this novel. At the same time, the confusion and conflicts within each narrator's heart make countless Micro dialogues. The unfinalizability of dialogue prompts readers to find the truth of the story. On the basis of Bakhtin's dialogic theory, this paper aims to analyze the polyphonic features of the novel by exploring the conflicts existing in four versions of narrations and the inconsistencies in each narration itself.

**Key words:** Polyphony; Sutpen; Uncertainty

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### INTRODUCTION

*Absalom, Absalom!* has long been considered one of William Faulkner's supreme creations, in which Faulkner exhibits his technical virtuosity and aesthetic genius to the full. As Faulkner's most complicated work, it has attracted great attention of critics and scholars since its publication. It opens itself up to economic, historical, philosophical, religious, cultural, and social analyses (Noel, 2007), on which enormous and extensive studies have been

conducted. Generally speaking, the scholars mainly focus on the reason of Sutpen's tragedy, the racial problem, the theme of the novel, the technique of multiple focalizations, and so on. In this paper we attempt to study the polyphonic features with Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory.

Polyphony, a concept originated in music, has been introduced to literature by Bakhtin. According to him, literary polyphony is essentially a dialogue of consciousness. It exists in the intensive juxtaposition of various consciousnesses, in "a world of consciousness mutually illuminating one another" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.97). Dialogue is the core of polyphony. What dialogic relationship reflects actually is consciousness' relationship.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is a dialogue about Sutpen's tragedy among four narrators. Three Great dialogues—the one between Rosa and Quentin, the one between Mr. Compson and Quentin, and the one between Quentin and Shreve—constitute the basic structure of this novel. At the same time, the confusion and conflicts within each narrator's heart make countless Micro dialogues. The unfinalizability of dialogue forces readers to find the truth of the story.

On the basis of Bakhtin's dialogic theory, this paper aims at analyzing the polyphonic features of the novel by exploring the conflicts existing in four versions of narrations and the inconsistencies in each narration itself.

### 1. ROSA'S VOICE

Rosa, one of the four main narrators of the novel, is the only one who has close contact with the central characters. Her testimony, therefore, should be the most accurate and reliable, but in fact it is not. More than once, she seems bewildered even astonished at what she tells. Her narration shows her inability to make sense of what she saw or experienced, but at the same time she exhibits absolute certainty about it. By analyzing

her words, it is not difficult for us to find that Rosa's understanding of the story is inseparable from her outrage and hatred of Sutpen. She occasionally asserts that Sutpen's goal was "respectability" (Ibid., p.16), and at another moment, she is sure that he is driven by "ruthless pride" and a "lust for vain magnificence" (Ibid., p.162). These depictions of Sutpen, more or less, come from Rosa's subjective speculation.

Apart from that, Rosa seems to have some psychological problems due to her unfortunate sufferings. She often emphasizes the fallibility of her narration: "there is such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles gropes for: No more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream" (Ibid., p.143). Since her childhood, Rosa has never lived a normal life, and her heart is closed and despaired, just like the shuttered and dusty room she lives in.

"The problem of perception, however, extends beyond the matter of memory, for Rosa often declares that the very past in which she lived and of which she speaks did not exist for her at the time." (Guetti, 1984, p. 67) This feeling reaches its culmination when she describes Charles Bon, who is the the most important person in her life. She loves Bon, she says, with a love founded upon contradiction and paradox, "beyond the compass of glib books: that love which gives up what it never had" (Faulkner, 2014, p.149).

She loved, as she remarks, a man who may not have ever existed at all except as her own imagined creation, a man she never saw alive or dead:

That was all. Or rather, not all, since there is no all, no finish...  
You see, I never saw him. I never saw him dead. I heard and  
echo, but not the shot; I saw a closed door but did not enter it.  
(Ibid., p.150)

What for her is the climax of the story that began with Thomas Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson is exactly what is most anticlimactic, and what is most important to her is the least real. And this is because, she tells us everywhere, she was then "living in that womb-like corridor where the world came not even as living echo but as dead incomprehensible shadow" (Ibid., p.162). Bon is unreal to her simply because he is somewhere outside that "corridor" beyond which even the commonplace might have been unreal.

When Sutpen proposed that they breed and then marry only if the child was a son, Rosa said, "...he had not thought of it until that moment..." (Ibid., p.168). Three pages later she completely denies this surmise: when she heard the proposition, "she realized like thunderclap that it must have been in his mind for a day, a week, even a month maybe..." (Ibid., p.171). Here she does not indicate a change in what she had thought. Both ideas may have existed in contradiction in Rosa's outraged mind for more than four decades.

It is not only because of her psychological problem and her inability to understand some activities of Sutpen, but also because of the objective circumstances around her,

that lead to the limitations of Rosa's narration. She is even 4 years younger than Sutpen's daughter Judith, and she moves to Sutpen's Hundred to live with his family after her father died. Rosa's psychological difficulties seem less important than the sheer external facts of the situations. "Rosa's awareness of her failure deflects the emphasis from a supposed neurosis within her to something acting upon her from without—a "corridor", a set of limitations that she somehow cannot escape." (Guetti, 1984, p.69)

## 2. MR. COMPSON'S VOICE

Mr. Compson has never seen Sutpen, whom he only heard from his father, General Compson, and some other insiders. Born in a prominent family, Mr. Compson is a typical Jefferson citizen, who is well-educated and quite philosophical. With his plentiful knowledge of history, Mr. Compson handles Sutpen's legend with a more objective and positive attitude. Then how is the credibility of his narration?

According to Mr. Compson's narration, we find that sometimes the story is not what happened but what he thinks happened. "His narrative is constantly to be on his own hypothesis as to what is able to imagine and what he prefers to believe." (Ibid., p.65) Details of his narration directly conflict with facts reported by Miss Rosa. His conjecture, indeed, sometimes contradicts Rosa's memory of her own experience, about which Rosa is supposed to know more clearly than him. For instance, Rosa's aunt, who lived with the Coldfields after the death of Rosa's mother, Mr. Compson says, eloped four years before Charles Bon visited the Sutpen plantation in summer (Ibid., p.70). However, according to Miss Rosa's narration, the elopement occurred in the same year as Bon's visit (Ibid., p.145). Another example, the time of Miss Rosa's going to live with her niece, Judith Sutpen, is also in dispute. Mr. Compson's telling implies that Rosa went to Sutpen's Hundred soon after her father died in 1864 (Ibid., p.87). But Miss Rosa says that she went to Sutpen's Hundred on the night when Henry Killed Charles Bon in 1865 (Ibid., p.153). In ignorance of the truth or for other reasons, Mr. Compson states that Rosa saw Bon's body (Ibid., p.104), nevertheless, Miss Rosa tells Quentin "I never saw him. I never even saw him dead." (Ibid., p.146). Acting as a sort of pallbearer, she "tried to take the full weight of the coffin to prove...that he was really in it". She "could not tell" (Ibid., pp.150-151). Anyhow, Rosa at some time went to Hundred and stayed for a period. As to the details of Sutpen's reencountering Rosa, Mr. Compson and Miss Rosa also give totally different depictions. When Sutpen returned from the Civil War and saw Rosa, his sister-in-law, Rosa recalls that he had to ask who she was because he did not remember her (Ibid. p.159). But when Quentin recollects his father's account of this scene, Sutpen immediately recognized Miss Rosa and greets her and Clytie in the same breath (Ibid., p.277).

"These errors", as Mr. Watkins analyses, "in direct conflict with Miss Rosa's memory of what she experienced, prove the extent of Mr. Compson's conjectures, and they reveal his imagination." (Ibid., p.58)

In addition, we can easily notice many inconsistencies in his own narration. At different times, he tells different versions of the same story. Once, for example, he says that Colonel Sutpen brought his wife's tombstone "in the regimental forage wagon from Charleston, South Carolina" (Ibid., p.126). Later, he gives another version of this story. Sutpen bought tombstones for his wife and himself while he was in Virginia, "ordered them from Italy" carried them around with his regiment for a year, hauled them to Gettysburg, "then through the Cumberland Gap and down through the Tennessee mountains, [...] and into Mississippi" (Ibid., pp.188-190).

The second account treats Sutpen's foolhardy persistence with more exaggeration, and it may indicate how a story grows when Mr. Compson ruminates it over in his mind. Either Mr. Compson's arithmetic falls far short of his imagination, or his carelessness becomes extreme, or Faulkner himself nods. "After Mr. Coldfield died in 64, Miss Rosa moved out to Sutpen's Hundred to live with Judith. She was twenty then" (Ibid., p.59). Four lines later, in the next sentence, "She (Miss Rosa) was born in 1845" If the year of her birth is correct, she was at most nineteen in 1864, possibly only eighteen.

As he doesn't have enough information about the Sutpen and the family, especially the complicated relationship among Judith, Henry, and Charles Bon, he follows his imagination and makes up several stories as to make his narration complete. However, his imaginations turn out to be self-contradictory. All these self-contradictory details given by Mr. Compson prove the uncertainties of his narration.

### 3. QUENTIN'S VOICE

Perhaps the most magnificent storytelling effort is made by Quentin, who narrates Sutpen's life from the beginning to the end, presented in Chapter 7. Quentin's narration is an amalgamation of the narrations of General Compson, Mr. Compson, Rosa, and Shreve, as well as himself.

Compared with those of Rosa and Mr. Compson, Quentin's narration is characterized with active imagination. In the narrations of Rosa and Mr. Compson, it is the limitations of these narrators that are most striking and revealing, but Quentin's story is different. For the first time in the novel the narrator presents a powerfully imagined narration that is in general consistent and reasonable within itself no matter how much it may be questioned ultimately nor how puzzling its arrangement is.

"It seems to Quentin that he could actually see" (Ibid., p.132). It may serve to introduce a narrative of startling imaginative intensity. For example, Quentin describes the scene when Henry Sutpen and Bon confront each other

on the way to Sutpen's Hundred, one brother is about to destroy the other. Quentin is frequently described as a seer, which in fact is impossible, so obviously he has endowed the story with imaginative reality.

Also, the limitation that begins here in the word "seems" grows larger when we consider that Quentin is often described as exhibiting a quality that is generally antithetical to his supposed imaginative vitality. He is said to speak in a "flat, curiously dead voice" (Ibid., p.258), or in an "almost sullen flat tone" (Ibid., p.255); he displays a "brooding bemusement" in a "tomb-like" room. Quentin also reveals explicitly his feeling of tiredness, of repetition, and of deadness, and the most interesting thing about Quentin's exhaustion is that it contrasts with his imaginative vitality. This paradox might be the "schizophrenia of the seer, the man whose powers of vision are extraordinary but who is exhausted by them because he, at last, is only mortal" (Guetti, 1984, p.81).

In Quentin's case, however, the paradox stems not from an emphasis upon his imaginative activity, but from an insistence upon his passivity: "Yes," he thinks, "I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much" (Ibid., p.207). This paradox of vitality and deadness, of Quentin as an active seer and a passive sounding board for all the voices he has ever heard, is pervasive in his narrative.

Quentin's exhausted despair is most often associated with the voice of his father, and it is suggested in this way that Quentin's problem may be, the same as the previous narrators', psychological. For example, Quentin tells Shreve that it was he, Quentin, who told his father the rest of the story based on what he discovered at Sutpen's mansion. However, later he admits that at the mansion, although he saw Clytie and Henry Sutpen, he was told nothing. It is self-contradictory, but Shreve's response is worth our attention:

It just came out of the terror and the fear after she turned you loose [...] and she looked at you and you saw it was not rage but terror [...] and she did not tell you in the actual words because even in the terror she kept the secret; nevertheless she told you, or at last all of a sudden you knew—. (Ibid., pp.350-351)

The excuse for Quentin's clairvoyance that Shreve presents here may be seen as a substantiation of the imaginative vitality mentioned before, and we may feel that Quentin really can know things without being told, and see what he thinks happened. In view of the narrators that have preceded him, and of our awareness of his own sense of frustration and futility, the fact whether Quentin's vision springs from what is apparently nothing becomes a problem.

### 4. SHREVE'S VOICE

Shreve is a young man from Canada who knows nothing about the old South, so he is the only narrator who doesn't blend into the story any subjective feelings towards the old

South. His narration is essential to the story. For instance, Shreve's narration in Chapter 8 modifies Mr. Compson's view of the Henry-Judith-Bon triangle relationship. He and Quentin, discuss with each other and reconstruct the legend of Sutpen.

Because of their relatively objective standpoint, the narration of Quentin and Shreve have been considered to be much closer to the truth than the first-hand account of Rosa and the second-hand hearsay of Mr. Compson. Besides, Quentin has listened to Rosa's and Mr. Compson's narrations: Two versions of the story can complement and amend each other. In addition to that, their narrations are placed at the end of the novel, which is usually seen as a more integrative, conclusive and authoritative part. However, the fact is that Shreve's flippancy and his remoteness from the South and from the life he talks about inevitably results in many fantasies and errors.

Shreve often makes mistakes, for example, Sutpen, Quentin says, did not tell Grandfather Compson "whether the voyage was hard or not" (Ibid., p.244). Later Shreve disregards this statement, or greatly distorts it, and says that Sutpen "didn't remember how he got to Haiti" (Ibid., p.255). Here "didn't tell" is changed into "didn't remember" in his narration. He also makes a doubtful conjecture about the finding of Sutpen's body after Wash killed him. Quentin says that Judith sent a "half-grown boy" to look for Sutpen, and he found the body in "mid-afternoon" (Ibid., p.285). But Shreve surmises that "they" found him "that night" (Ibid., p.185). For two times Quentin and Shreve report that Bon was wounded in the war, but later they surmise that actually Henry was the wounded one.

On one hand, Shreve's remoteness from the life he tells is likely to cause incomprehension even misunderstanding. On the other hand, in order to make his story dramatically satisfying, Shreve makes many conjectures in his narration. The credibility of the "final" version is undercut because both of the narrators appear to be unreliable. Quentin is nearly destroyed by his emotional involvement in the story, and Shreve does not understand the circumstances of the story at all, and at the same time they exhibit too much vitality in imagination.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, four narrators, to different extent, offer some details even basic facts in conflict with each other. Some narrators go so far as to contradict themselves. What the real story is becomes an eternal mystery, and no one can find the truth. It is just the confusion, the uneasiness, and the anxiety that the novel causes in reader's mind that makes it art, which presents us truth, virtue and beauty. The great dialogues among four narrators and the micro dialogues within each narrator constitute a magnificent, solemn and stirring epic, which tells the tragic story of Sutpen with different voices from different perspectives. Great dialogues and micro dialogues weave into an intricate and exquisite web, embracing all facts and imaginations, reality and conjectures, for readers' reference when they attempt to find the truth.

The technique of Polyphony endows the novel with polynary themes and abundant connotations. Therefore, there is no absolute end in this novel. Under this condition, every reader becomes a detective, trying to grasp any clue or hint to find out the truth. However, as we all know, life is just like an infinite polyphony. No one can be the real authority. All we need to do is to participate in the recreation of the story and appreciate its perpetual charms.

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